

Myth #54: "Sell The Sizzle And Not The Steak": Mark Twain In Carson City by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Virtually every town in the United States having an association with the great American writer Mark Twain has capitalized on his name to market some aspect of his colorful life to tourists. Some communities have made an effort to be faithful to the facts and not represent a good story as actual history. Other towns don't let the facts get in the way of a good story. In the case of Carson City, reinventing Samuel Clemens, AKA Mark Twain, is considered acceptable boosterism.



Samuel Clemens rode by stage to Carson City from St. Joseph, Missouri with his brother Orion, the newly appointed Secretary of Nevada Territory, in August 1861. His job working for Orion didn't last but a few weeks. Over the next year, young Sam traveled all over the new territory, visiting Lake Tahoe, prospecting near Unionville in then-Humboldt County and Aurora in Esmeralda County, before finding his way to Virginia City in September 1862 to take a job as a reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise*.

Initially Samuel Clemens used the penname "Josh" when writing for the *Enterprise*. His first major assignment was to cover the second territorial legislature in Carson City beginning in November. Sam was not only reunited with his brother, but also with his sister-in-law Mollie and seven-year-old niece Jennie who had recently moved to Carson City. Orion and his family lived in rented quarters until his wife convinced him to build a house that could serve as the Governor's Mansion. Territorial Governor James W. Nye was out of the territory so much that Orion spent a great deal of time as Acting Governor, making Mollie the "First Lady" (Governor Nye's wife resided in New York and choose not to live in Carson City). "No one on this planet ever enjoyed a distinction more than she enjoyed that one," Sam wrote. A proper house was needed "commensurate with these dignities."

This is where the local license begins. An advertisement promoting Sam Clemens' association with Carson City appeared in the September 16, 1999 issue of *Travel Weekly*, a trade magazine with a 50,000 circulation. The ad promoted Carson City's historical house walking tour and featured a photo of Samuel Clemens next to the heading "See the House where Sam Clemens gave birth to Mark Twain." The ad continued, "History is just around the corner in Carson City, Nevada's capital. Visit the house where a youthful Samuel L. Clemens created his *nom de plume* 'Mark Twain'-and recreated American Literature." A check of the Ormsby County deed books reveals that Orion Clemens purchased the property at the corner of Division and Spear streets from George B. Cowing on November 17, 1863. George and his brother Joseph had been living in a small structure on the property. Orion either razed the Cowing abode or incorporated it into his palatial two-story clapboard residence. By early 1864, the house was completed "at a cost of twelve thousand dollars" according to Sam.

Actually Samuel Langhorne Clemens had been known as "Mark Twain" at least a year before his brother Orion's house at 502 North Division Street was constructed. Sam had dropped the penname "Josh" and first signed himself "Mark Twain" in a letter written on January 31, 1863. The *Territorial Enterprise* published the letter in its Tuesday, February 3, 1863 issue (<http://www.twainquotes.com/18630203t.html>). Although the letter signed as "Mark Twain" was sent from Carson City while on assignment, the fact is Sam Clemens gave birth to Mark Twain long before Mollie and Orion's "Governor's Mansion" became his capital hangout in the few months before he left Nevada Territory for California in May 1864. Orion sold the house on August 14, 1866 after moving to Meadow Lake, California, with Mollie earlier in March. Jennie died on February 1, 1864 and was buried in Lone Mountain Cemetery.

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Ironically, humorist Mark Twain may have approved of the ad with his penchant for hoaxes and hyperbole. Twain as a creative writer had few reservations about playing tricks on the living and the dead—witness the exaggerated account of his time in Nevada, California, and Hawaii in *Roughing It* (1872). However the man Sam Clemens, with his distaste for tomfoolery and trickery would likely have told us the truth, much like Huck Finn did when he exposed hucksters and humbugs the Duke and Dauphin selling their flimflam and flapdoodle up and down the Mississippi River.

Photo: Orion Clemens house, Carson City. Samuel Clemens (AKA Mark Twain) stayed there during the 1864 territorial legislative session. Photo circa 1930, courtesy of the Nevada State Museum

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